



Montgomery County Council

For Immediate Release

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**Remarks by George Leventhal
on Assuming the Council Presidency
December 6, 2005
Rockville, Maryland**

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I want to begin by thanking my colleagues. It is a great honor – and a great responsibility -- to serve as President of the Montgomery County Council. I appreciate your faith in my ability to do the job.

This past year has been extraordinarily productive and has moved this county forward. Much of the credit is due to the leadership of my friend Tom Perez. We are nine independent cats on this council, and no one takes orders from anyone else. Yet, somehow Tom managed to herd all of us where we needed to go, through consultation with each of us and by earning our trust. Thank you, Tom, on behalf of a grateful county. Now you can have your life back...sort of.

I also want to congratulate Marilyn Praisner on her election as council vice president. When all the other council members' cars – and my motorcycle – are long gone after a hard day's work at the council, Marilyn's car is still here. Nobody sweats the details like Marilyn and nobody cares more about making sure Montgomery County taxpayers get the good government and good management they expect and deserve. I look forward to working even more closely with her in the coming year.

When my parents and I first moved to Montgomery County in 1964, it was a very different place. The county was overwhelmingly white, with a small African American population and hardly any Asian-Americans or Latinos. Mostly, folks commuted downtown or to federal facilities here such as the National Institutes of Health, where my father and mother worked. Silver Spring didn't need revitalizing yet. The most exotic meal you could get in Bethesda was a plate of french fries at the Hot Shoppes. The Beltway had just opened. And Germantown was a small rural community.

There was one thing, though, that county residents then have in common with county residents now. Like us, they chose this place to be their home. They felt blessed to live in Montgomery County.

And we are blessed. Life is good here.

We have a diversified economy that helps us ride out economic highs and lows. Our unemployment rate is 2 percent. We have beautiful parks, trails, lakes, creeks, pools and other recreation facilities. We have a world-class school system that ranks among the best in the nation. Montgomery College is among the top community colleges in the United States. Our library system is the ninth best in the nation among communities with half a million people or more. The values of our homes – the largest investment nearly all of us will ever make and the repository of most of our wealth – are sky high. We enjoy outstanding cultural and entertainment opportunities at facilities such as Strathmore, the Black Rock Center for the Arts, Imagination Stage, AFI, and Olney Theatre – among others.

But we are not just a successful county. We are a generous county. Having achieved success, we are not going to hang out the “No Vacancy” sign and pull up the ladder that would allow newcomers to join us in enjoying the good life here. That's not us. And, if I have anything to say about it, it never will be.

We are reaching out to help our small and minority businesses. We must complete the task we started this year, implement our Local Small Business Reserve program and extend and improve our Minority, Female and Disabled program for county contracts.

We are expanding access to health care for the estimated 80,000 uninsured residents of the county. We are making sure every baby born in the county gets a healthy start in life. From pre-natal programs to “Care for Kids” to Montgomery Cares to our community pharmacy to more respite care for seniors, we are working to guarantee every resident, at every stage of life, access to quality health care.

Amidst that red-hot real estate market, we are working to keep housing units affordable for longer periods of time, update our model MPDU program to get more new units, and creatively seek public-private partnerships to produce more housing for working families.

We are taking steps to clean up our air and our water. This council passed the strongest Special Protection Area in the county’s history in the Upper Rock Creek to protect our watersheds. We are the largest government purchaser of clean, renewable energy east of the Mississippi. We are expanding the use of alternative energy in county vehicles. And we are pushing ahead on “green buildings” for the future.

When I think of the issues facing us as a county, I see the faces of the real people we represent:

I think of Martin Mayorga, who started out with a \$1000 stake from his credit card, put everything he had at risk to start a coffee importing and roasting business, and has made Mayorga Coffee Roasters the hippest place to be and be seen in Silver Spring. Martin’s vision has improved the quality of all our lives. We need to assist our young entrepreneurs to realize their visions and achieve their dreams.

I think of Denise Jones, a single mother who works so hard to make sure her brilliant fifth-grade daughter Aimée gets the very best that is available to her in the Montgomery County Public Schools. Day and night, Denise helps Aimée with homework, coaches her for the Geography Bowl, advocates on her behalf with her teachers and her principal, and takes her to cello practice and Girl Scouts. Denise knows it requires aggressive parenting to make sure a child receives

everything to which she is entitled. And, to make sure other kids get the same chance in life, Denise serves as President of the NAACP Parents Council chapter at Aimée's elementary school. We need to ensure the deck is not stacked against any of our children.

I think of Dave Weitzer, a dairy and grain farmer just outside of Poolesville. Dave generally wakes up around 5:30, does some paperwork, and goes down to the barn to make sure the cows ate well, had a good night and are making plenty of milk. During planting time, Dave works hard to get the corn and bean crop planted. During the growing season, Dave checks the field to make sure its growing well, with no unexpected weed or insect problems, and that it's been adequately fertilized. Like every farmer in Montgomery County, Dave's operation is highly leveraged. He can't farm unless he can borrow for equipment, animals and other necessary inputs. We need to make sure that our Agricultural Reserve is not only set aside as open space, but also as a productive and viable place where farmers can earn a living and feed our community.

Do we have problems and challenges? Sure we do. I'm reminded of the old Irish wedding toast, directed at newlyweds: May you have lots of problems – all small ones.

Our problems arise from our successes.

Because so many people want to live and work here, we continue to experience unacceptable traffic congestion. This council has increased spending on transportation infrastructure by one-third since we took office. We have made progress in carrying out the 10-year, \$7 billion transportation plan approved by the council in 2002. We have broken ground on the Montrose Parkway, built or begun construction on nearly two dozen new intersections and interchanges, and significantly increased Ride On bus service. And I am pleased that the day is soon upon us when we'll turn earth on construction of the Inter County Connector.

Still, we can't do it all alone. We need a Governor who's engaged on something other than the ICC. We need state action to get the Purple Line and the Corridor Cities Transitway moving and – on

those – the Governor is missing in action. That's got to change if we are to ratchet up our anti-congestion efforts to the next level.

Because we are such a desirable place to live, the pressure for growth and development is strong. We must make sure that we are managing growth, rather than letting it manage us.

But let's keep things in perspective. Despite everything you have heard in the last year, we do have a tradition of good planning and good land use management in Montgomery County. Between the Agricultural Reserve and county, state and federal park land, nearly half the county is off limits to development. Our growth rate is one of the slowest among jurisdictions in this fast-growing region. Our population grew by 37 percent between 1970 and 2000, compared to 64 percent in Anne Arundel County, 105 percent in Fairfax County, 119 percent in Carroll County, 130 percent in Frederick County, 194 percent in Prince William County, 302 percent in Howard County and 356 percent in Loudoun County. Housing starts for this year will likely end up around 2,000 –the least since 1997. School enrollment is now estimated to be flat for the next several years, and we are reducing the number of portable classrooms in use.

The problems in Clarksburg, at the Planning Board and in other agencies will continue to preoccupy this council for the next two to three months. I want to make sure we adopt a package of legislative reforms on Planning Board governance before we receive the County Executive's budget in March.

We all own what happened in Clarksburg – and by “all” I'm talking about the private sector, too. And we all have a stake in fixing it. County residents deserve – and expect – good government and good management. They expect stability and predictability. They expect there to be a clear set of rules and regulations and someone to make sure they get followed to the letter.

What is the basic lesson of Clarksburg? Let me tell you.

We are here to serve the people of Montgomery County. Those of us in government cannot forget that. We are here to meet the needs of the people who sent us here and who pay our salaries.

If county residents want to see records, the records damn well ought to be available.

If county residents call and ask questions, they are entitled to have their phone calls returned and their questions answered.

And the lessons of Clarksburg are not limited to Park & Planning. I am talking about all county government agencies. We need to re-instill a culture of customer service in county government.

We are here to serve the people of Montgomery County. They pay the bills. They expect and deserve no less. And if that central notion of customer service is missing then we can check off every little box on our action agenda on Clarksburg and still come up short.

Another problem of success involves taxes. Rising property assessments have meant rising property taxes for all of us. Last spring, under Tom Perez's leadership, we delivered significant across-the-board, as well as targeted, tax relief to county residents while still funding county services. The across-the-board relief amounted to an average of \$300 per household. And I am optimistic that we will deliver additional tax relief in the coming year.

But we must always keep in mind that there is no free lunch. If you want good schools, libraries, and roads – if you want to help the most vulnerable among us and provide the police, fire and emergency services a growing county needs – that takes resources. We pay more to get more.

If you build it they will indeed, use it. Our parks, recreation centers, roads, and transit facilities are heavily used. Over time, we've seen shortfalls in infrastructure and maintenance for existing county facilities. It's a problem we began to identify last year under Marilyn Praisner's leadership – and we made a small down payment of \$7 million toward it in last year's budget. I want to see us make more progress in next year's budget.

Another major challenge that we must confront is the surge in condominium conversion that displaces our neediest residents. We

need to work with our allies in the state legislature to develop better protection for renters who have no other housing options.

John W. Gardner, who founded Common Cause and served in Lyndon Johnson's cabinet, once said:

"We are continually faced with a series of opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems."

So it is with us.

Montgomery County is an infinitely more interesting, sophisticated and stimulating place than it was when my parents first put down roots here in 1964. Our county is a magnet for thousands across the nation and across the world because here in Montgomery County, you can put down roots, work hard, get good schooling for the kids, and enjoy a good quality of life. And I am proud that people from other places bring their talents and abilities here to strengthen our economy and make our community better.

No matter where you were born, no matter what language you speak at home, no matter where you worship on Friday or Saturday or Sunday, no matter what you look like, we all have this in common:

We chose this place to be our home.

It falls to us – to the nine of us – to be good stewards of this place that we love. To preserve the things that make it so special. Our job is to carry on a tradition of good government and good management. Our job is to enhance what is good and correct what's wrong.

With the help of my colleagues and all of our constituents, I look forward to spending the next year doggedly pursuing those opportunities to make a great county even better.

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